

Profits before lives: Germany's federal and state governments shorten quarantine time despite massive Omicron wave

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The German ruling class is reacting to the explosive spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant not with the necessary protective measures but with an escalation of its herd immunity policy. This was underscored by the decisions of the Conference of Minister Presidents of the Federation and Länder (MPK) on January 7.

The meeting centered on the decision to shorten the quarantine period for infected people. According to the MPK's official decisions paper, those infected or in contact with an infected person should now be in isolation for only 10, seven or five days. Previously, the official quarantine period was 14 days.

If those infected or their contacts have a negative PCR test or "high-quality antigen test," they can be released from quarantine after only seven days.

Staff at hospitals, care and nursing homes may even be released from quarantine or isolation after five days if they present a negative PCR test and have been symptom-free for 48 hours. Children with a negative test may also be released from quarantine after only five days. Those with a booster vaccination no longer have to be quarantined after contact with an infected person.

The new regulations contradict all scientific evidence and will lead to more sick and infected people returning to work and school. It is well known that infected people can be contagious for much longer than 10 days after the onset of symptoms. Likewise, it is known that infected people can transmit the virus even when they display no symptoms. Even those who have had booster shots can infect themselves or others as a result of vaccination breakthroughs.

In addition, PCR tests and especially antigen tests can provide a false-negative. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that the officially scheduled tests are consistently carried out. Teachers and students frequently report that those who test positive are sent back to school by the health authorities.

The claim by Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) at the press conference following the MPK meeting that all "necessary measures" were being taken against the pandemic is a bald-faced lie.

The only, and completely inadequate, restriction that the "traffic light" federal coalition, comprising the SPD, Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP), together with the 16 state governments (Länder) put in place is a so-called "2G-plus" regulation for the catering

industry, beginning on January 15. This means the unvaccinated are barred, those with two jabs must show a negative COVID-19 test, and those with a third shot must show proof of their vaccination status.

A comprehensive lockdown, which would be necessary to stop the Omicron wave and contain and eliminate the pandemic altogether, is vehemently opposed by all government parties.

The measures taken are explicitly aimed at keeping schools and businesses open under all conditions. Already on the day before the MPK meeting, the state education ministers demanded "a revision of the quarantine rules for pupils and school staff." They declared that "maintaining school operations" was "essential," and, moreover, "a basis for ensuring the functioning of other critical infrastructures."

At the press conference with Scholz, the mayor of Berlin, Franziska Giffey (SPD), expressed similar views. She said there was "a commitment to keeping schools open in order to maintain provisions for the population." She added, "People need good child care so they can go about their business, and that's why it's important that we keep the schools open here."

Giffey spoke openly about the fact that the murderous herd immunity course is supported by all government parties—the SPD, Greens, FDP, Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Left Party. The question of school closures was "no longer even up for debate" in the decisions taken, she stressed, "because it is a matter of course that we have reached an agreement on this point."

The return to unsafe schools after the Christmas holidays is also supported by the Education and Science Union (GEW). The day before the MPK meeting, GEW Chair Maike Finnnern signaled her support for the federal government's quarantine plans in a tweet. If this was what the federal government's Council of Experts recommended, she said, the GEW could "go along with it."

In his speech on January 6, Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP) summed up the essentially fascist character of the policies of the ruling class. "The protection of health" was "a high social good, but the highest good of our Constitution is and remains freedom," he declared, in the manner of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

It is clear what "freedom" Lindner is talking about—the freedom of the banks and corporations to enrich themselves off of the death and suffering of millions of workers and their families. To ensure

capitalist profit maximisation, the ruling class has been trampling over corpses since the outbreak of the pandemic. Officially, some 5.5 million people have died of COVID-19 worldwide—more than 1.5 million of them in Europe and more than 113,000 in Germany. Over the same period, the share prices and the fortunes of the superrich have exploded.

From its outset, the new “traffic light” coalition government has been willing to continue this class war policy. Its first official act was to declare an end to the “national epidemic situation” and thus remove the legal basis for uniform nationwide protective measures. In doing so, it has set into motion an even greater disaster.

In its second statement on January 6, the federal government’s COVID-19 expert panel warned of a collapse of the health system, stating:

A high volume of patients combined with acute staff shortages can jeopardise general medical care in Germany within a short period of time. All medical and nursing care facilities must prepare for a considerable stress situation in the coming weeks.

The statement points out that the supposedly “milder course” of Omicron infections compared to the Delta variant is outweighed by the “strong infection dynamics and the associated high number of parallel illnesses.” The “very high case numbers in individual European countries and in the USA,” it continued, were “currently leading to a significant increase in hospital admissions.”

In fact, the situation in the US and many European countries is completely out of control. Since a week ago, there has been an average of more than 600,000 new infections in the US, and hospitals are on the verge of collapse. Particularly worrying is the rapid increase in hospitalisations of children.

At the same time, opposition is developing. In numerous school districts, including in Chicago, a city of millions, educators are refusing to return to in-person teaching in order to protect their health and that of their students and families.

The rapid spread of Omicron is also evident in Western and Southern Europe and Scandinavia. In Denmark, the 7-day incidence rate is currently 2,334 per 100,000 inhabitants; in the UK it stands at 1,865. In France, where Omicron became the predominant variant over the holidays, the incidence level is now 2,142. On Friday, Paris reported a new record, with 262,787 new infections.

The situation is similarly dire in Italy, where the 7-day incidence rate has more than doubled in one week. On Friday, the Supreme Institute of Health (ISS) in Rome reported an average of 1,646 coronavirus cases per 100,000 inhabitants. The previous week, the figure had been 780.

Omicron is also spreading rapidly in Germany. According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), 44.3 percent of all new infections in the country can be traced to Omicron. In eight federal states in northern and western Germany, the variant is already dominant. In Bremen, governed by an SPD-Left Party-Greens coalition, where

Omicron already accounts for 85.5 percent of all infections, the 7-day incidence rate is also the highest, at just under 800. The RKI reported 56,335 new infections nationwide on Friday and an increase in the 7-day incidence rate to 303.

The real numbers are many times higher. At the turn of the year, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (SPD) said that the real data is “currently probably two to three times higher [than] the incidence rates we are recording.”

To stop the Omicron wave and prevent the emergence of even more dangerous variants, the working class must intervene onto the political arena. It must organise itself into independent rank-and-file committees and take up a struggle to end the pandemic based on the principles formulated by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) in its Open Letter to the Working Class:

- The current policy of “herd immunity,” which allows for the limitless spread of COVID-19 in the population, must be rejected. Instead, the implementation of a new strategy aimed at the elimination and eradication of SARS-CoV-2 is required.

- Containment measures must be guided by public health needs. The protection of human life and the safety of the population must have absolute and unconditional priority over any corporate financial interests. The costs of fighting the pandemic—including the payment of wages and salaries, compensation for small business owners, comprehensive medical care for the sick and payments to survivors—must be borne by big business. There also needs to be a 100 percent tax on the pandemic profits made by large investors through the rise in share prices.

- The fight against the pandemic must be waged on a global scale. The pandemic can be stopped only if SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated in all countries. Workers in Germany and throughout Europe must demand that their colleagues in less developed countries be given the necessary vaccines free of charge.

The implementation of this programme requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system and a clear international socialist strategy and perspective.



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